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AUTHOR Johnson, Ronald B.; Licata, Joseph W.
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ABSTRACT

To test the replicability of an earlier study of the informal relationships among school administrators, researchers interviewed 16 principals of schools in an urban district in the southwestern United States. The earlier study had used unstructured scheduled interviews with 28 principals in a small city and suburban district to discover grouping and interaction patterns. That study found that principals tended to communicate most with only one or two peers, were aware of other informal grapevines, and formed guild-like patterns at the secondary level and clan-like patterns at the elementary level. Analysis of the information gathered in the current study revealed patterns generally similar to those found earlier. Informal interaction tended to parallel formal structure, taking place through verbal means in dyads and triads of trusting peers. A clan-like structure extended into the secondary principals in the later study, perhaps because of a past relationship between two specific elementary and secondary administrators. Sponsorship ties (links between principals and their former subordinates who have since become principals in their own right) seem particularly important to the grapevine structure. An important function of the grapevine was to allow principals to protect themselves and their organizations through "boundary-spanning" activities. (Author/PGD)

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URBAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR GRAPEVINE STRUCTURE

by

Ronald B. Johnson

and

Joseph W. Licata

The Academic Faculty of Educational Administration
College of Education
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

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URBAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

GRAPEVINE STRUCTURE

Field studies of armies, factories, political parties and prisons, for example, have noted social structure characterized by informal grouping patterns and communications networks that wind their way around formal organizational structure.¹ Laymen and social scientists alike typically refer to such structure as an institution's "grapevine". While efforts by Boyan² and Iannaccone³ studying school faculties and Griffiths exploring teacher mobility⁴ probably pioneered informal systems analyses in school and school district organizations, recent inquiries such as the work by Wolcott describing rival "moieties" formally and informally interacting in the face of a school district change effort⁵ suggests the continued viability of this area of investigation for those interested in educational organizations.

School Administrator Grapevine

Let's consider a hypothetical example. Fred is a first-year principal, having been promoted from an assistant principalship about one year ago. In a private meeting, the superintendent informs Fred that he (Fred) will receive a 25% salary increase. Because this is such a large salary increase in comparison with the increases issued to other principals in the district, the superintendent warns Fred that the increase should and will be kept secret. Fred agrees and tells no one of the good news. The next day Fred arrives at the monthly principals' meeting and is greeted by a fellow principal who bellows, "Well, well, it's the 25 percenter!" Fred smiles sheepishly, personally surprised at how fast the grapevine works among administrators in his district.

Recently, viewing a specific school administrator subculture as an informal organization, Licata and Hack reported informal grouping and interaction patterns between and among school principals in a small city/suburban school district.⁶ Such social structure, probably similar to the structure encountered by Fred in our hypothetical example, seemed to supplement formal organizational means of communication and reflect patterns of occupational socialization and adaption. Since this study of a small city/suburban school administrator grapevine preceded and stimulated the study of an urban school administrator grapevine reported in this paper, it is probably worthwhile to summarize the initial study and its findings.

Using an unstructured scheduled interview form, a technique which employs specific questions but allows the interviewer follow-up questions to determine the meaning of the respondents' answers,⁷ Licata and Hack interviewed all 28 principals in the small city/suburban school district noted above. These interviews of three high school, five middle, seventeen elementary and two special education school principals averaged about 45 minutes and usually took place in the principal's office. Responses to each question produced a field of data from which investigators inductively formed natural clusters of similar responses and subsequent generalizations or conceptual explanations. The following generalizations emerged from these processes.

The interview question, "Which principals have you contacted recently for information or advice?", yielded sociograms and subsequent informal grouping and interaction patterns based on verified two-way communication links (e. g., principal 16 named principal 20 as a partner in informal interaction and visa versa). This informal social structure seemed to parallel formal organizational structure with elementary principals associating primarily with elementary principals, high school principals with high school principals, middle school principals with middle school principals, and special school

principals with special school principals. High school principals, middle school principals, and principals of the special schools for emotionally disturbed children seemed to form groups and interaction patterns that were somewhat guild-like in nature, reminiscent of formal and informal associations of craftsmen or tradesmen during the middle ages who shared similar professional competence and the need for mutual aid and protection. Elementary principals seemed to cluster into social patterns that appeared to be somewhat clan-like in structure. Many elementary principals interacted with other elementary principals who had either worked for them as a teacher or assistant principal, or with another principal who shared a common professional mentor or ancestor. Other principals could be described as "loners" or "isolates" with respect to their peer group. They seemed to feel closer relationships to central office personnel rather than their peer group, some possibly owing their position predominantly to sponsorship from the central office.

Two clan-like groups of elementary principals emerged from analyses of individual characteristics of group members. The "working principals," as they called themselves, tended to be composed of younger principals who spent very little time as a teacher before becoming a principal. Not unlike the "GASers" described by Griffiths⁸ or "promotable" principals described by Lipham,⁹ they expressed career aspirations beyond the principalship and seemed to feel they had a reputation in the district for innovation and upward career mobility. The other group tended to be older, more experienced both as a teacher and principal, and none had aspirations beyond the principalship. While the researchers found it tempting to characterize this group as "place bound," "locals," or "non-innovative," a review of the data suggested that they tended to portray themselves as "innovators" or "instructional leaders" about as often as the "working principals."

When asked, "What means or structure do you use in communicating informally with peers?", the principals indicated conversations taking place via chance meetings, telephone conversations and encounters at district-wide meetings and events. These interactions constituted most of the informal interaction within this subculture and appear consistent with Wolcott's characterization of the principalship as a verbal culture.¹⁰ Most principals identified relatively particularistic topics of interaction dealing with specific situations and problems, e.g., "... a student expulsion ...," "... problem with school nurses ...," or "... our school's test scores ...". Often interactions served as a way of cross-checking perceptions to avoid "being caught out on a limb." Because the content of interaction could often be perceived by significant others as being indicative of possible incompetence or subversive activity, these informal interactions tended to be unobtrusive, exclusive, involving diads or triads of trusting peers. While widespread interaction involving most principals was possible given the potential of their informal network or "grapevine," such communication seemed rare and hardly indicative of the routine way this informal system operated.

In response to the question, "Do other grapevines exist in this district and do you have access to them?", principals noted the existence of separate grapevine structures among central office personnel, teachers, parents, non-certified employees and students. "Grapevine" seemed to be a term the principals associated with horizontal or peer communications. "Pipelines" appeared to be their term to describe upward and downward informal interaction ties between various organizational levels, e.g., a particular principal might have an interaction partner who is assistant superintendent or visa versa. Interaction via pipelines usually involved interactors with shared allegiances and selective interaction based on conditional trust. For instance, the principal with a pipeline to the central office understands that the interaction

may not be kept totally secret because he knows the assistant superintendent has a certain allegiance to the superintendent; just as the assistant superintendent realizes that the principal has certain loyalties with respect to his peer group. Still, these communications seemed to be used by the inter-actors as a means of reducing uncertainty in their everyday lives, a means of cross-checking perceptions to make the consequences of their decisions more predicable.

In summarizing their findings Licata and Hack noted that virtually all principals had moved to their position from positions as teachers, vice-principals or other professional positions within the district. Not unlike other findings,¹¹ the entire principal group in this district had accumulated a considerable amount of managerial experience (257 years for the 28 principals). Only 22 of these years represented managerial experience gained outside of the district. "In-breeding," seemingly applicable to the principalship at all levels, was seen as a possible factor that tended to nurture the development of clan-like, if not guild-like clusters of principals. This socialization pattern seemed to produce relatively stable peer relationships in the principals' subculture, increasing the ability of individual principals to adapt or adjust to their organizational roles and subsequent stabilization and perpetuation of the local educational system.¹²

Alluding to Thompson's boundary spanning notion,¹³ Licata and Hack characterized grapevines as informal boundary spanning structures. These structures seemed to link institutional, managerial and technical subsystems¹⁴ or organizational subunits at the same hierarchical levels. Principals with informal communication lines to key opinion leaders in the community have access to data which may assist in buffering the school's instructional core with respect to demands and input changes from the external environment.

Those principals with grapevine links to other principals might compare notes about possible district-wide policy changes as a way of improving their school's ability to adapt or adjust to such changes. "Trial balloons", e.g., a principal mentions to certain teachers that an increase in teacher supervision duties is being considered and then awaits and analyzes the response from the teacher group before actually making a decision, was described as an informal boundary spanning structure between the role of principal and the teacher subculture which reduces the risk of making certain decisions.

Purposes

One limitation of the study noted above is that its descriptions and generalizations may be simply reflective of a single "snapshot" of a system at a specific point in time and space. There is little to assure the researchers, given the same study being done at a different point in time in the same district or in another district, that findings and generalizations would be similar or substantially the same. As a means of addressing particular concerns about whether or not findings and generalizations hold up from one social setting or sample to another, the researchers decided to conduct a similar study in a different school district, an urban school district in the Southwest. Consequently, the primary purpose of this study is to explore the degree to which generalizations from the initial grapevine investigation can be replicated in a different setting with a new sample of school administrators. There was no attempt in this study to directly compare and contrast suburban as opposed to urban school administrator grapevine structure as a central theoretical variable.

Methodology

An unstructured scheduled interview form was again employed with selected questions from the form used in the initial study. These questions focused

directly on the principals' informal system or grapevine interaction. The questioning format was modified somewhat based on the emic and etic dimensions of the interviewer/informant relationship. This was done to systematize and intensify the potential of follow-up questions.¹⁵ Interviews took place in the principals' offices lasting about 45 minutes in duration. Data were collected during March, 1981.

The school district selected for the study is located in a major city in the Southwestern United States. While the district is not the largest school district in the city, it serves over 17,000 students with 16 schools: 10 elementary and 6 secondary schools. Initially, the school district served a predominantly white clientele; however, over the past years the ratio has been shifting to one which is predominantly black. The sample was composed of 10 elementary principals, 4 middle school principals, and 2 high school principals (6 white, 10 black; 5 female, 11 male).

Similar to the initial study, the principals' answers to each interview question formed a data field from which investigators inductively derived natural clusters of similar responses and subsequent generalizations. The researchers clustered data independently at first, then compared their generalizations as a means of cross-checking perceptions and analyses. The following findings emerged from these processes.

Results

Two-Way Communication

Figure 1 shows only two-way verified communication between principals in the urban school district; e.g., principals 6 and 14 independently identified each other as informal communication partners. This sociogram emerged as a result of interview question: "Tell me, among other principals in the district, which ones would you most likely contact for information or advice?"

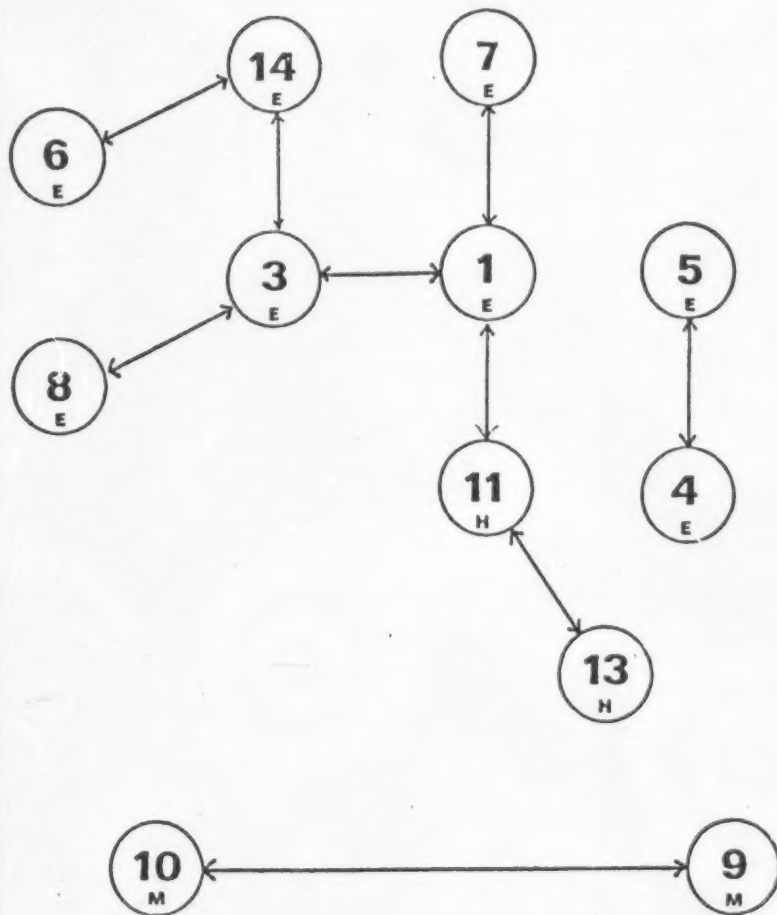


FIGURE 1 VERIFIED TWO WAY COMMUNICATION

Each circle in the sociogram has a number and a letter. The number represents a principal in this urban school district. The letter represents the school's level, e.g., E = elementary school, M = middle school, and H = high school. The arrows at each end of a bar indicate direction of interaction initiation and independent verification by principals that they informally communicate with each other. This sociogram does not indicate the frequency with which this interaction takes place.

As noted in Figure 1, two-way verified communication between principals in this urban district, like the previously studied suburban sample, suggest informal structure which closely parallels formal school district structure. Elementary principals tend to associate with elementary principals, middle school principals with middle school, and high school with high school principals. The only exception noted in this figure is the relationship between a high school principal (11) and an elementary principal (1). These two were previously assistant principals in the same high school and maintained their relationship after becoming principals.

When the researcher presented all reported communication links (see Figure 2), one- and two-way links, the general clustering of elementary principals with elementary principals, and secondary principals with secondary principals (high school and middle school) is still apparent. Again, the only exceptions seem to be with the relationship between 1 and 11, and a somewhat weaker one-way relationship between 9 and 4.

The grouping patterns in Figure 1 appear less definitive with respect to the clan and guild notions. Certainly the middle school principals suggest a clan-like grouping when one realizes 9 worked for 10 before becoming a principal himself. In the larger group, 6, 8, 14, 3, 1, 7, 11 and possibly 13, clan-like characteristics are present. Principals 8

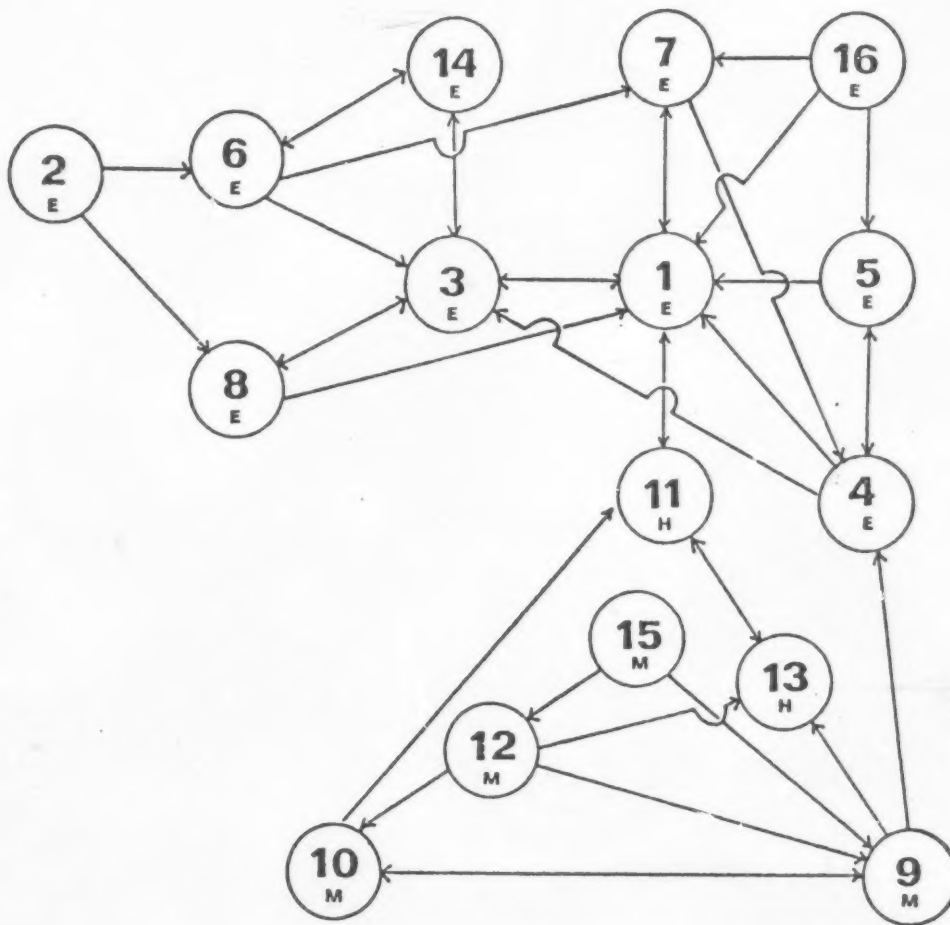


FIGURE 2 ALL ONE AND TWO WAY COMMUNICATION

and 3 are sisters, 3 was once an assistant principal of 14, 11 was an assistant principal with 1 in the same school, 6 and 14 were both older principals with more than 20 years in the district as teachers and principals who reported that they interacted together as a result of similar philosophies, 3 and 1 as well as 7 and 1 also reported that their interaction ties were related to shared philosophical and practical orientations. These relationships seem similar to those Licata and Hack identified as clan-like.

An interesting diad was found between principals 4 and 5. Factors which focused the investigator's attention on this diad were their age, racial composition of their schools, years of educational and administrative experience and their backgrounds. Principals 4 and 5 administer schools having ratios that are approximately 60% black and 40% white, with enrollments of 578 and 877, respectively. The two have 67 years of teaching and administrative experience between them. Both principals come from very different backgrounds. One principal was an army intelligence officer and speaks five languages, while the other principal is actively pursuing a doctorate in education. Principals 4 and 5 have a relationship based on many years in the business together and the location of their schools makes them professional neighbors. These principals were not perceived as tired individuals waiting for retirement. They appeared concerned about the future of their students and respected by their peers. One principal was commonly referred to by his peers as "The Old Gray Fox." In terms of other principals' perceptions, principals 4 and 5 might be considered "honored anachronisms," for they were seemingly from another time but bringing the sum total of their skills and experiences to bear in their present positions.

Principals 11 and 13 are the only two high school principals in the district. They have developed a more guild-like relationship based on mutual respect for each other's competence and administrative abilities. Were it not for the relationship between 1 and 11, the three levels of schools (elementary, middle, and secondary) would exhibit much the same grouping patterns as were present in the suburban grapevine study.

All One- and Two-Way Communication

Figure 2 represents all one-way and two-way informal communication patterns between and among principals. By carefully examining the maze of circles and arrows, one can perceive certain patterns. For example, principals 2, 8, 6, 3, 14, 7, 1, 16, 5 and 4 are elementary principals grouped together. With the exception of the aforementioned relationship between 1 and 11 and a weaker one-way link between 4 and 9, elementary and secondary groupings are clearly distinguishable. The secondary group is composed of the middle school and high school principals 11, 13, 10, 9, 12 and 15. Upon closer examination of the two groups (elementary and secondary), "immediate" and "extended member" relationships can be observed. In the elementary cluster, for example, principals 6, 8, 3, 14, 7, 1, 5 and 4 are considered immediate members because they are engaged in a two-way communication network. While elementary principals 2 and 16 might be considered extended members, because there are no two-way interaction patterns with only limited one-way communication ties to members of an immediate family.

Another interesting pattern that emerged in the elementary group was the fact that certain elementary principals were focal points of interaction patterns. Principals 1 and 3 seem to be the principals most contacted by

other principals. Principals 1 and 3 assume a shaman-like role in that they are regarded as being particularly bright and skillful. Their primary function was to buffer the principal subculture from uncertainty. Their skills or perceptions, perhaps literally the "tricks of the trade," give principals 1 and 3 high legitimacy among their peers. A principal remarked, "I call 1 to get the flow of things." Another commented, "He (1) and I think along the same lines; he's a good sounding board." One would think these two to be aged deans of the principals' subculture. However, this is not the case. Both are in their middle to late 30s with an average of 9.5 years of administrative experience.

Figure 2 provides an opportunity to analyze possible sponsorship patterns in both the elementary and secondary clusters. These patterns may be useful in explaining lines of communication as well as clan-like relationships. For example, at the elementary level 2 worked for 6, 3 worked for 14, and 7 worked for 4. A variation from this pattern is suggested in the fact that 8 worked for a present central office administrator. It is interesting to note that not all possible sponsorship patterns result in two-way interaction. For example, principals 2 and 6, and 4 and 7, have one-way links (usually to possible sponsors) whereas in the same cluster of principals 14 and 3 have two-way interactions with each other. While these one-way patterns may suggest that possible sponsors feel the sponsorees have no valuable input, such sentiments were not conveyed during the interviews.

Analysis of the secondary principal cluster reveals 9 as a possible sponsor of 15 and 10, while 11 might be considered a sponsor of 10. However, in terms of two-way links principals 9 and 10 are the only principals with two-way sponsorship or interaction links. Sponsor 9 does not call sponsoree 15 and sponsor 11 never calls sponsoree 10. Such one-way patterns again suggest

the dependent nature of a sponsoree's relationship with sponsor as well as support for the notion of sponsorship itself. Also, it should be noticed that when the two clusters (elementary and secondary) are compared based on possible sponsorship patterns, they both appear clan-like. This is in contrast to the finding of the suburban grapevine study where elementary clusters were clan-like and secondary clusters were guild-like. Secondary principals 11 and 13 are exceptions because they appear guild-like based on their respect for each other's administrative skills and there is no sponsorship pattern between them.

Principals were asked about their professional aspirations; most secondary principals (83%) had central office aspirations and most elementary principals (63%) did not have such aspirations. This pattern is similar to the one reported in a recent study of upward mobility patterns among school administrators in Michigan¹⁶ and the suburban study done by Licata and Hack. However, unlike the distinctions between suburban elementary principals based primarily on shared attitudes about upward mobility, urban principal associations could not be described on this basis.

Another finding similar in both studies was the fact that both districts were heavily inbred. That is, almost all principals moved into their positions from teacher positions within the district. In the urban grapevine study, only one principal interviewed had not previously been a teacher in the district.

In the suburban sample, loners were defined as principals who do not interact extensively within their peer group or as principals having little or no informal communication ties to their peers. The urban grapevine study used the terms immediate and extended members. Immediate members were those principals who had at least one two-way link, whereas extended members were

principals who had no two-way links but only one-way links to other principals. Principals 2 and 16 fit these criteria. While such status is largely unexplained for 16, extended family status for 2 appeared related the pattern in which sponsoree rather than sponsor initiates interaction for advice.

Other Interaction

The question, "What means or structures do you use in communicating informally with peers?" produced similar answers in both studies. Principals tend to use the telephone and personal interaction at regularly scheduled meetings as the primary means of communicating informally. In the urban grapevine study, many principals stated that they interacted informally before, during, and after the regular Tuesday morning principals' meetings. This was a similar situation with the district-wide meeting in the suburban grapevine study. Again supported by these two examples, is the idea that the informal organizational structure closely parallels the formal organizational structure.

A second interaction question focused on the factors that motivated principals' interaction with a peer. Responses fell into two categories--one concerned with teacher matters and the other with central office policies and procedures. During the time the investigator was conducting interviews for this urban study, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was trying to organize teachers in the district. As a result, of the 44% responding to teacher matters, 31% were related to the AFT's impact on teachers in the district. Another 44% were motivated by central office and policy concerns. Several principals were concerned about a new discipline policy. Although the suburban grapevine study did not quantify results relative to motivation

of informal interaction, the topics of concern were not unlike those which motivated activity in the urban grapevine study. The motivation for most of the principals involved the need to be in synchrony with decisions of peers regarding the same matters.

A third question dealt with other grapevines existing in the district and principals' access to them. The suburban study suggested the existence of individual grapevine structures among central office personnel, teachers, non-certified employees, parents and students. The urban study listed eleven grapevine structures which could be sorted in the same categories as the original study. The point should be made that when the term grapevine was mentioned, almost 80% of the principals asked that the investigators give a contextual clarification of the term. It seemed as though the principals wanted a clear distinction between grapevine (peer) and pipeline (super-subordinate) structures. However, in the urban grapevine study, all principals did acknowledge the presence of other grapevines and access to several grapevine structures.

Conclusion

Apparently, findings reported in a suburban/small city context showed some similarities to the urban context. For instance, findings in both studies suggest patterns of upward mobility from teaching to the principalship involving individuals from within a particular district. Informal interaction tended to parallel formal structure, taking place through verbal means in diads and triads of trusting peers. Principals in both studies seemed to be able to identify grapevine structure among peers and among members of other groups in their district.

While both studies revealed clan-like and guild-like associations, membership patterns in such groups in the urban district differed from those reported

In the initial study. Clan-like associations in the suburban/small city context were exclusively composed of elementary principals; in the urban district, clan-like relationships involved both elementary and secondary principals. The GASer distinction was less visible in defining urban elementary principal group structure. Although guild-like associations were less apparent in the urban district, they were still understood in terms of relationships between and among secondary principals--the case in the suburban/small city context. These variations in structure between districts may be explained more by possible accidents of social dynamics (recall 11 and 1 in the urban study) than by any real theoretical differences between districts.

It is important to note that multiple differences between suburban and urban samples emerged, differences that are largely unexplained by these data. For instance, clan-like structure was exclusively elementary in the suburban system and not in the urban system. Upward mobility aspirations explained subgroup structure to a higher degree among suburban principals. Loner or isolate status could not be found in the urban district. Perhaps these variations are related to the "single snapshot" limitation and that studies like these simply inventory situational possibilities. Certainly as many questions are generated as are answered by this study. However, while situational differences did occur, generalizations about the functions of grapevine structure seemed to hold up across samples.

One of the major generalizations which emerged from the first grapevine study involved the notion that informal interaction among school administrators could be understood in terms of occupational socialization as a latent function. This generalization is again suggested by urban school administrator grouping patterns and interaction which often appear to be based on possible sponsorship ties.

Many principals tended to interact with former subordinates who had gone on to other principalships or visa-versa. Further, shared professional aspirations and orientations and previous extra-school district associations seemed to emphasize the socialization function of the urban school administrator grapevine. The finding that newer principals tended to consult the principal (possible sponsor) they had worked for as a teacher and that they almost always are the initiators of the interactions may suggest a mentor role for certain experienced principals in the socialization of younger members of the subculture.¹⁷ As with the initial study, this urban principals' grapevine seemed to produce relatively stable peer relationships, predictable candidates for subcultural membership and assistance to principals in adapting and adjusting to their organizational roles. In so doing, the grapevines in both districts studied probably contribute to the stabilization and perpetuation of the larger educational system.

Another major generalization emerging from the initial grapevine study suggested that grapevine interaction could be understood in terms of informal boundary spanning. Again, urban principals seem to provide little to contradict this notion. While the content of interaction may differ between urban and suburban principals, both groups tend to use grapevine interaction to protect themselves and their organizations from environmental uncertainty. Informal boundary spanning by principals across institutional, technical, and managerial subsystems or between subunits at the same hierarchical levels provided information necessary for appropriate adaption to uncertainty as well as coordination to avoid the dilimma of being "caught out on a limb."

In the urban system, for example, principal boundary spanning activity often focused on efforts by the AFT to organize teachers in the district, a possibility that may have been potentially threatening to principals. Shaman,

principals often sought for information and advise, probably play a key role in such informal boundary spanning activity. If shamen play a role in terms of providing trustworthy technical advice, one might even speculate about the role or function of the honored anachronisms during such times, perhaps as a means of providing historical cross-checks and symbolic assurance that long-term survival is a possibility.

The study of school administrator grapevine structure, employed in only two school districts todate, provides generalizations which must be considered tentative in nature. Further, both studies employed interview methodology, possibly suggesting the need to enrich this line of inquiry with methods other than interviewing. Since grapevine activity usually takes place "behind the scenes" via spontaneous and unobtrusive interaction, the selection of appropriate methods seems to be a challenging undertaking. Observing grapevine interaction over a period of time, e.g., throughout the AFT episode, might also provide valuable insights. Keeping such cautions and possibilities in mind, and without expressing surprise,¹⁸ the central implication of this research may be that an understanding of how principals, schools and school districts operate is at best in part related to the observation of what Goffman would call "on stage" and "back stage" behavior.¹⁹

Footnotes

- 1 See Theodore Caplow, How to Run Any Organization (Hinsdale, Illinois: Dryden Press, 1976), pp. 76-78 or Wayne K. Hoy and Cecil G. Miskel, Educational Administration: Theory, Research and Practice (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 59-60.
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- 11 "Department of Elementary School Principals. The Elementary School Principal - a Research Study. The National Elementary School Principal, 37th Yearbook of the Department of Elementary School Principals. National Education Association, Washington, D. C., 1968.
- 12 Licata and Hack, pp. 86-99.
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- 15 Ronald B. Johnson, Ojo Arewa and Joseph W. Licata, "Emic and Etic Analyses in Educational Administration," A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, California, March, 1981.

- 16 Katherine Gaertner, "The Structure of Organizational Careers," Sociology of Education, 53, 1980, pp. 7-20.
- 17 It should be noted that in the suburban/small city sample, relationships between possible sponsors and sponsees were two-way with either principal as initiator of interaction. No clear explanation is available to explain why this difference existed between samples.
- 18 John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan suggest that it is time researchers in educational organizations stop expressing surprise over such findings. See their "Notes on the Structure of Educational Organizations: Revised Version," a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, California, August, 1975.
- 19 Erving Goffman, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1951).